Afterword: Towards a Knowledge Society and Sustainable Development: Deconstructing the WSIS in the European Policy Context

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The year 2004 was one of transition in the EU. Firstly to a wider Union of 25 member states, with a greater diversity of interests and levels of development; secondly, to a new Parliament and Commission, both of which will wish to re-orient policies; and thirdly, to the new planning perspectives for the period from 2007 to 2013. The follow-up to the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society must fit in with these transitions.

The 'Prodi Commission' has already set out the general orientations for the period beyond 2006 (EC, 2004a). These set three new priorities, the first of which is sustainable development through higher growth and better jobs. This is complemented by the third priority for Europe to become a stronger 'global player', notably as a sustainable development partner for the developing world. These priorities have been reflected in the Commission's proposals for the 2nd phase of the WSIS (EC, 2004b).

There is now wide recognition that information and communication technologies are one of the most important contributors to growth and sustainable development. In some countries, notably Ireland and Finland, ICT investment has made the major contribution to productivity and growth. In others, such as Italy and Spain, the impact of these technologies has still been small.

This disparity is highlighted in the recent OECD report (Pilat et al., 2002) – and the EITO 2004 report – on ICT, growth and competitiveness. The key conclusion from this observation is that investment in ICTs must be accompanied by investment in skills and organisational change. We therefore need a more systemic approach to development of a sustainable information society: greater synergy between RTD, regulation and deployment actions; greater investment in more effective public services, notably for health care and education, as well as for administrations; and more active promotion of 'eco-efficient' technologies and their use.

In Europe, the core activity for information society development remains European RTD. This must again be strengthened, and the Commission has proposed five priorities: to realise coherence in the European Research Area; to stimulate increased investment in RTD (to 3% of GDP by 2010); to increase the

European investment in IST; to strengthen the dissemination and exploitation of results; and to show stronger European leadership in global initiatives.

A good example of such leadership exists in the connection of universities into high-speed collaboration network – the 'GEANT' network now covers over 3000 universities and R&D centres in 36 European countries. It interconnects to the U.S., Canada, China, Japan and Korea, and to South America via Brazil. It is now the world-leading research network on which global knowledge exchanges can be built.

Policy and programme re-orientation needs to be built on evidence-based evaluation of the effectiveness of current interventions. We have therefore carried out, in 2004, a mid-term evaluation of the 'eTEN' support to pan-European information infrastructures; a five-year assessment of IST research and technology development; and an independent study of how all these measures contribute to the 'Lisbon' and 'Sustainable Development' Strategies.

These evaluations will all feed into the reviews and re-orientations of the Lisbon and Sustainable Development Strategies in early 2005, by the new Commission.

The 'Digital Europe' project has been a key element in linking our activities on the information society to sustainable development. There are six major links:

- Higher 'added value' in all products and services;

- Some products become immaterial services;

- More efficient supply chains and transport logistics;

- Improved energy efficiency in intelligent buildings and vehicles;

- More efficient use of buildings and city infrastructures (EC, 2004c);

- A better 'work-life' balance through use of ICT – with more work in local communities and better land-use planning.

We can therefore see the following issues emerging in the WSIS and its follow-up: to strengthen the link between the 'information society transition' and 'sustainable development':

- A clear causality between effective ICT-use and innovation-led growth: ICT as a key factor in development;

- The e-Europe Action Plan as a model for sustainable national e-strategies throughout the world;

- Recognition of the important role of the private sector, not just as suppliers of ICT, but in promoting effective use (through CRS and the Global eSustainability Initiative);

- A new focus on the 'digital divide', both in Europe's regions and worldwide: access to knowledge-infrastructures for learning and entrepreneurship; and

- New initiatives for resource efficiency: eco-efficient technologies, and resource efficiencies through innovative uses of new technologies.

These issues are elaborated in the Commission's proposals for the 2nd phase of the WSIS-COM (2004) 480 of 13.07.04 (EC, 2004b). I commend them to your attention.

References

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